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ABSTRACT

The Anonymous Families History Project of the University of Minnesota developed guidelines for college students researching and writing the social histories of their families. Included in the guidelines are interview questions, tips for conducting an oral interview, a primary source list, and a bibliography of background reading. Question topics include the organization of family life; family activities; family decision making and status; family careers and opportunity; family life cycle; family migration; and the impact of historical events upon the history of individuals in the family. Oral interview tips include avoiding middle class biases; arranging questions autobiographically and topically; keeping questions short and to the point; concentrating on relationships rather than objects; avoiding abstract historicism; and actively directing the interview. (Author/DE)

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WRITING THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF ONE'S FAMILY...

Revised Guidelines for faculty members
and students.

Summer, 1973

by Richard Brown and Tamara K. Hareven, National coordinators, Anonymous Families History Project.

With a special supplement from Ronald Grele, Oral History Project, The Ford Foundation

Dear Colleague:

Thank you for your interest in participating in the Anonymous Families History Project. Enclosed are the tentative guidelines for students and instructors. We are planning to expand and revise the guidelines as they are being used. We would appreciate your reactions, criticism, and additional suggestions.

John Modell, Associate Professor of History, University of Minnesota has joined us as curator of the Anonymous Families History collection at the Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota which have now become the official depository for the collection. Professor Clark Chambers, Director of the Social Welfare History Archives, and Andrea Hinding, the curator, have extended their expertise and good will in agreeing to house the collection, index it and protect the privacy and confidentiality of the papers. We would appreciate your encouraging as many of your students as possible to write family histories and to deposit them in the archives. Please address all communications pertaining to the deposit of papers to Professor John Modell.

We sincerely hope the guidelines will be useful as a first step, and we urge you to share your difficulties, questions, and enthusiastic reports with us.

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THE Format of a Family History

The possibilities of family history range anywhere from a 10-page essay to a 200-page Master's Thesis. A decision will rest on the scope of particular assignments as well as available time and source materials. For example, students have written family histories as term papers in introductory level survey courses. Typically, this has been suggested as one of several alternatives so that students who for any any reason find such an assignment undesirable are free to do other things. At this level a student may be expected to interview family members of two or three generations, determine family size, activities, and socio-economic data for a period stretching back at least 40 years. They may also discover patterns of identity and motivation within the family, lines of discipline and authority as well as celebrations or ceremonies that maintain family coherence. Usually students are able to make some kind of generalization about the presence or absence of mobility and coherence within their family and furnish some explanation for their findings. Essays in this category rely heavily on oral history for data and rarely employ more than two or three secondary publications such as a local or ethnic history.

A more ambitious type of family study emerges from undergraduate seminars and independent study projects. Here papers may range from 25 to 50 pages, go back 75 or 100 years, and include documentary sources as well as oral history. Students at this stage may be expected to familiarize themselves with secondary materials pertaining to subjects relating to their own family, as well as some of the recent studies in the field of family history. Within this format students should feel free to follow the family history wherever it leads and to develop whatever themes are most interesting or accessible. Judgments of this sort will often be made in conjunction with the supervising instructor.

The most complete and fully developed histories are those written in graduate seminars and as Master's Theses. Here the student may be expected to tell the story of the family with a completeness and sophistication that make it a genuine contribution to social history. The student will not necessarily cast a wider net on probe farther than three generations, but whatever boundaries are set, the story should be complete in its own right, should exhaust available oral and documentary sources, and demonstrate awareness of the existing secondary literature.

The formats described here have commonly been employed, but they should not be regarded as the only possibilities. Students and teachers should determine a family history format that meets their own needs. The function of the Anonymous Family History Project is to serve the student first of all, so students should select formats that suit them and their own family stories.

Regardless of the scope of the essay students will find the data form a useful starting point and should be encouraged to fill it out as an appendix.

Questions for Interview of Relatives

Listed below are examples of questions students might ask family members they interview. This list is not exhaustive.

Questions pertaining to the internal experience of the family:

I. Dwelling and organization of family life:

1. Did family members other than the parents and their children live in the same apartment or house, in the same building, along the same street or in the same neighborhood?

2. Did married daughters or sons continue to live in their parents' household? Did aging parents live in their children's households, in their own dwellings, in retirement communities, or in old age homes?

3. How did the family organize its living space? Who slept in what room? How was the work and living space divided? How crowded was the household?

4. Were there servants and boarders living with the family?

II. Social organization and family activities:

1. What were the daily schedules of family members? How did they spend their time at home and their holidays?

2. Who visited whom, how frequently and over what periods of time?

3. What kind of family celebrations were held? Were there family reunions held? How were weddings, baptisms, funerals and other ceremonies held? Who attended? Where were they held?

III. Decision making and status in the family.

1. How were key decisions made on moving, schooling, occupational choice, and approval of marriage?

2. How were decisions on daily family business made? (Budget, housekeeping, etc.)

3. Who disciplined the children and by what means?

4. Aside from parents, what other adults participated in disciplining the children? Did grandparents participate in rearing their grandchildren?

5. What types of conflict occurred in the family and what were the responses?

Interview of Relatives

III. (cont'd)

6. Were there persons treated as "Black Sheep"? How did this effect their relationship to family members?

7. How were family members ranked (sex, age, ability, occupation, success) in terms of their privileges and obligations?

8. What were the sitting arrangements during meals?

IV. Aid and responsibility.

1. Did parents help their children in college, or business? Did mature sons and daughters support their aging parents?

2. Who cared for sick or dependent family members?

3. How did well-to-do members of the family relate to those of lesser means?

V. Family and property.

1. Who owned property in the family and how did they manage it?

2. Did the women receive dowries?

3. Who inherited what?

VI. Careers and opportunity.

1. At what age did sons and daughters leave home to embark on their careers? Did women leave earlier than men?

2. Did sons follow their fathers' occupations?

3. What was the family's attitude towards the work of women?

4. What influence did parents and grandparents have on the occupational choices of their grandchildren?

5. What criteria and priorities did family members get for "success"? (Financial, occupational, residential, scholarly, "good marriages".)

VII. Questions pertaining to the life cycle:

1. How were babies treated in the family?

2. Up to what age was a child considered a "child"?

3. Was "adolescence" recognized as a special stage?

4. At what age was a young person expected to take on adult responsibilities?

5. What were attitudes towards aging?

6. Did aging parents continue to live with their children?

VIII. Migration and the Family.

1. Who in the family was first to emigrate to the United States or to move from one location to another?

2. What relatives followed?

3. Why did family members decide to migrate and relocate?

4. What contact continued with the old country?

5. How often did family members return to areas they had moved from?

6. Did they remember their places of origin with nostalgia?

Factors External to the Family

When interviewing members of the family one should inquire about "historical" events which may have had an impact on the history of the family. Examples of such events or developments may include:

> Wars, depressions, periods of prosperity, emancipation of slaves, Jim Crow laws, immigration policies, military service, employment patterns, welfare services, urban renewal, technological change, transportation, and mass media.

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWING FOR FAMILY HISTORY

By Ronald J. Grele
Oral History Project
Ford Foundation

The best interviews, such as those done by T. Harry Williams for his biography of Huey Long, are those which are the best researched. Oral history is not a replacement of the written record; it is rather a supplement, or complement, to the kinds of records usually used in doing research. Before even discussing an interview with a potential informant (unless, of course, he is on his death bed) a good interviewer will do his homework. All available family documents -- Bibles, old letters, diaries, photo albums, tax and property records, citizenship papers etc. should be collected and examined. Not only will these serve as general documentation of your family's history but they will also serve as a beginning archives for this project.

From these documents the student should attempt to compile his family's chronology and history and compare and contrast it to the more general history of the culture, society, town, group, class, race, etc. to which the various members of his family belong. This should provide the student with a wider vision of his family's history and also permit him to identify the particular personal and social relationships upon which to focus the interview.

After having completed the research on his family and its social context the student should then frame his questions, the most difficult aspect of any interview. Many students, and some very practiced interviewers, believe they can frame a set of questions in some tightly categorical order without reference to a larger historical or social context. We are all familiar with marketing surveys, public opinion polls or census collections which use such questionnaires For a number of reasons this may not be the best method of questioning.

In oral history interviews we usually gather information from people who are statistically unrepresentative. Death, senility, the vagaries of memory, social movement and other factors have all reduced our sample in a most random and unrepresentative manner. Our informants, however, while not "representative men" may be typical of millions of others who experienced particular historical processes. Thus my German-American grandfather who was a shop foreman in a small New England town and who does not represent a very large statistical sample of the population at large does, however, typify many immigrants to this country who participated in a particular phase of the mechanization of American industry and the industrialization of American society. Accordingly, an interview structured around historical processes rather than a logical categorization would result in a more useful document.

The interviewer should also take care not to become trapped by questions. Most oral history interviewers have found open questioning a much better technique than a questionnaire because of the tendency of questionnaires to limit responses to "yes" or "no". Questionnaires also have a subtle influence

on the interview because of the close relationship between membership in the middle class and paper work. They can also become destructive instruments because they distort the reality of the oral history interview.

Theoretically the interviews which you will record are conversational narratives in which you participate not only to encourage responses, but also as a medium through which your informant speaks to his community and its history because you represent that community and history. You, the interviewer, will therefore play a crucial role in conducting the interview despite the fact that you will actually say very little. Your major role will be to direct and guide the form which the final narrative will take and to insure that it contains as much of the informant's past and his views of the past as possible.

In general the two most common forms of oral history narrative are autobiographical and topical. The student will have to decide for himself which form best suits his own needs and abilities and the needs and abilities of his informant.

In creating an autobiographical narrative one begins at the beginning - birth - and then moves on to childhood and behond. Great care must be taken in questioning, for memory may be very selective. You may find it useful to keep in mind various theories of growth with which you are familiar, such as Erikson and Piaget. It is also good practice to provide your informants with any documents, photos or bits of information which will trigger their memory. To aid them in such a manner is perfectly correct -- you are not interviewing to test memory but to record narratives and you need all the help available.

If you choose to cover only specific topics, such as a strike or a family crisis, or to concentrate upon one facet of a person's life, such as spatial arrangements, outline your plan of questioning before you begin. It will serve as a guide, but remember a good guide is only that. Do not force yourself or your informant to stick to your outline if it becomes apparent that it is limiting the answers you are engendering. Be prepared to jump wildly from point to point and back again, and try to keep quiet. Do not move too rapidly to your next question because this is a signal to your informant that you believe the topic under discussion has been adequately covered. He will oblige you and you may miss just the nugget which would have illuminated his history. What you want is his narrative. You must follow what he believes to be the logic of his life not what you believe that logic to be. The logic of your life will be recorded when your grandson or granddaughter interviews you.

During the interview, be it autobiographical or topical, listen carefully. This is difficult. Linguists estimate that 50% of a modern language is redundant in the sense that we constantly repeat ourselves. Thus most of us find it possible to follow a conversation without listening to every bit of it. In oral interviewing one should try to catch everything because our aim is to pursue in detail. A minor variation to a story may lead to a new and unanticipated question which in turn will lead to a whole new realm of discourse. Also if you listen carefully you will find the natural points at

which the narrative can be broken to allow you to ask more specific questions or question particular usages of languages, ie: You stated that your father was a tyrant (or gentleman). "What do you mean by that?" "Any examples?" After such a break the narrative can be continued quite easily in a manner which is rational to both interviewer and interviewee.

Most of you will find interviewing a pleasant experience for yourselves and for your informants, but it can become very tiring after an hour or two. Most oral historians agree that, except with especially verbose people, two hours is just about the limit for a single interview session. Do not worry about this. Simply make another appointment and go home to listen to your tapes for missed questions and unexplained gaps in the testimony. You can begin your next session by filling in on the previous session. The shortness of the interview makes correction that much easier.

Let me close by urging upon you some basic points to be considered in framing questions. Don't bias your questions. Not only should you avoid key words and phrases which will taint the response, you should also assume nothing. There are many questions such as the degree of family stability or instability which are still open. Don't foreclose any possibilities. The same phenomena in one situation, such as the existence of boarders or lodgers in a home may mean something entirely different in another. Don't overload your questions. Keep them short, clear and to the point.

Remember; relationships change, phenomena don't. A rose is a rose is a rose ... and it smells. Its place in the family Bible however carries a much different meaning if it was put there after a funeral or after a dinner dance. In your interviewing concentrate upon the relationships not the objects.

Avoid middle class biases. Keep your usage of "choose" to a minimum. Don't assume a deep commitment to individualism and individual satisfaction. In many cases you may find that family, community, class or ethnic sentiments were far more the reality of life than self gratification or individual rights. Don't assume that everyone has or has had the same aims in life as you do. Do not divorce the internal experience of the family from the larger society except in discussing those aspects of family life which you have good evidence to assume had little to do with the society.

Beware of abstracted historicism -- the belief that basic humar conditions exist outside of time and place or structure. Certain experiences, processes and even psychological states only occur within specific historical epochs. Put your informants firmly in their own times and the events of their lives and generalize from these specifics.

Good oral history is made by good historians. Your families deserve the best and if you are careful in your research, aware of your biases and assumptions and alert to the limits and possibilities of history you should do well. A convenient bibliography of works covering most of these points can be found in Training in Depth Interviewing by William H. Banaka, (Harper and Row, New York 1971). Good luck.

Primary Sources for Researching the Family History

1. Materials in the possession of the family: picture albums, family letters, home ownership papers, family business records, marriage and birth certificates, diaries, autobiographies, and family heirlooms.

2. Vital records---birth, marriage and death records are found in local churches, town halls and court houses. They are indexed alphabetically in most places. Entry passes of immigrants to the United States are deposited in the records of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service in the National Archives.

3. Geneologies and Local Histories (country or town) are generally available in local historical societies or libraries. They are especially important for Native American families.

4. The U.S. Federal Census Manuscript Schedules are available for the period 1850-80 for most states. For the period following 1890 the State Census are available for certain states (for ex., New York and Rhode Island).

5. City Directories can be used to trace individuals, their residences and occupations, from about 1830 on.

6. Artifacts---Surviving family homes, where accessible; furniture, clothes, and family heirlooms can often be more revealing than written accounts.

Books

I. Studies Related to the understanding of the family in American History.

Philippe Aries, Centuries of Childhood: A [illegible]l History of [illegible]amily Life. London 1962.

Robert Bremner, et. al., edits. Children and Youth in America, Vols. I-II. Cambridge, 1970.

Robert Coles, Children of Crisis. Boston, 1967.

John Demos, A Little Commonwealth; Family Life in Plymouth Colony. New York, 1970.

Erik Erikson, Childhood and Society. New York, 1964.

E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States. Chicago, 1966.

Herbert Gans, The Levittowners. New York, 1967.

Herbert Gans, The Urban Villagers. New York, 1962.

Paul Goodman, Growing Up Absurd. New York, 1960.

Philip Greven, Four Generations. Ithica, New York, 1970.

Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted. Boston, 1951.

Oscar and Mary Handlin, Facing Life: Youth and the Family in American History. Boston, 1971.

Kenneth Keniston, The Uncommitted; Alienated Youth in American Society. New York, 1965.

Kenneth Keniston, Young Radicals; Notes on Committed Youth. New York, 1968..

Mirra Komaravsky, Blue Collar Marriage. New York, 1964.

Christopher Lasch, The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual As a Social Type. New York, 1965.

Peter Laslett, The World We Have Lost. New York, 1965.

Gerda Lerner, edit., The Black Woman in America. New York, 1972.

Oscar Lewis, La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty-San Juan and New York. New York, 1966.

Robert Lifton, edit., The Woman in America. Boston, 1965.

Margaret Mead, Culture and Commitment. New York, 1970.

Margaret Mead and Martha Wolfenstein, edit., Childhood in Contemporary Cultures. Chicago, 1955.

Richard Sennett, Families Against the City. Cambridge, 1970.

Bernard Wishy, The Child and the Republic. Philadelphia, 1967.

II. Family Histories and Autobiographies.

Mary Antin, The Promised Land. Boston, 1942.

Hyman Berman and Eli Ginzberg, edit., The American Worker in the Twentieth Century: A History Through Autobiography. New York, 1963.

Allen Churchill, The Roosevelts: American Aristocrats. New York, 1965.

Alfred Kazin, A Walker in the City. New York, 1951.

Anne Moody, Coming of Age in Mississippi. New York, 1968.

Ailon Shiloh, in connection with the Pittsburgh Section of the National Council of Jewish Women, By Myself I'm a Book. Waltham, Mass., 1972.

Piri Thomas, Down These Mean Streets. New York, 1967.

John Waters, The Otis Family in Provincial and Revolutionary Massachusetts. Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1968.

Richard Wright, Black Boy; A Record of Childhood and Youth. New York, 1966.

Malcolm X, The Autobiography of Malcolm X. New York, 1965.

Several novels might be of particular interest:

Abraham Cahan, The Rise of David Levinsky. New York, 1960.

O.E. Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie.

Henry Roth, Call it Sleep. New York, 1970.

For an example of a recent family history completed by a professional historian, see: Richard Brown, "Two Baltic Families Who Came to America; the Jacobsons and the Kruskals, 1870-1970," American-Jewish Archives, 24, (April, 1972) 39-93.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR MAILING FAMILY HISTORIES

Family histories are to be mailed directly to the depository: Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota. 55455

Real assurances of anonymity are important if we are to gain a broad sample of student family histories. Accordingly, all papers entered in the Archives will be given an identification number, keyed to the index that will be prepared there, from which researchers will call for particular papers. Only the curator will know which names go with which numbers.

All students wishing to contribute their family history papers to the AFHP will be required to fill out a Standard Clearance Form. Students may, if they wish, include a written statement declining anonymity, but when such a written statement is included, provisions for anonymity will be taken as a matter of course.

Because of the importance of broad coverage, the Archives will accept for permanent deposit <u>all</u> histories submitted from participating faculty. For the same reason, we ask you to send along all that you receive, written by students who are willing to contribute their work.

Together with your batch of family histories, we ask you to submit a brief description of the auspices under which you collected them. Specifically, we are interested in the name and level of the class in which they were collected, the time allotted (a quarter, a term, one of several year papers), and how you explained to your class the rationale of such papers for students in the particular course from which you collected them.

7. What ethnic and social groups are discussed in your paper:

☐ Blacks ☐ Indians ☐ Mexicans ☐ Puerto Ricans

☐ Jews ☐ Central Europeans ☐ Italians ☐ Slaves ☐ Irish

☐ British ☐ Native Americans over several generations

☐ East Asian ☐ Other

8. What sources did you use in compiling your family history.

☐ Interviews of other family Members ☐ Family Bibles ☐ Family Genealogies ☐ Vital Records

☐ Land records ☐ The U.S. Census ☐ Other

PLEASE INCLUDE THIS SHEET AT THE FRONT OF YOUR FAMILY HISTORY.

CHILDREN

1. Name _____

Place of birth _____ Date _____

Number of years of schooling _____ Occupation _____

Residence _____ Marital status _____

Number of children _____ Migrated to _____

2. Name _____

Place of birth _____ Date _____

Number of years of schooling _____ Occupation _____

Residence _____ Marital status _____

Number of children _____ Migrated to _____

3. Name _____

Place of birth _____ Date _____

Number of years of schooling _____ Occupation _____

Residence _____ Marital status _____

Number of children _____ Migrated to _____

4. Name _____

Place of birth _____ Date _____

Number of years of schooling _____ Occupation _____

Residence _____ Marital status _____

Number of children _____ Migrated to _____

5. Name _____

Place of birth _____ Date _____

Number of years of schooling _____ Occupation _____

Residence _____ Marital status _____

Number of children _____ Migrated to _____

Dear Contributor to the Anonymous Family Histories Archive:

So that your family history can be made more useful to historians and others studying American families, we are asking you to fill out the form below. This will take you only a few minutes, and will be easily made over into an index which will permit archive users ready access to just those kinds of family histories needed.

****
* OFFICE USE
* CODE
* (ID # ____)
*
* (ID # ____)
****

1. Your name: _____

2. Your college: _____

3. Check the earliest date for which you have been able to say things about your family in this paper.

☐ Before 1750 ☐ 1750-1800 ☐ 1800-1850 ☐ 1850-1900

☐ 1900 or later

4. Please check all regions of the United States in which members of your family whom you have discussed in this paper have lived. (See map below)

☐ New England ☐ Middle Atlantic ☐ South Atlantic

☐ East South Central ☐ West South Central ☐ East North Central

☐ West North Central ☐ Mountain ☐ Pacific

5. Please check all occupational categories in which members of your family whom you have discussed in this paper have found themselves.

☐ Farming ☐ Mining ☐ Shopkeeping or small business ☐ Transportation

☐ Big Business ☐ Manufacturing ☐ Professions

☐ Industrial labor ☐ Other

6. Please check all religious groups to which members of your family whom you have discussed in this paper have belonged.

☐ Roman Catholic ☐ Jewish ☐ Presbyterian ☐ Methodist

☐ Baptist ☐ Episcopalian ☐ Congregational ☐ Lutheran

☐ Quaker ☐ LDS ☐ Other Protestant ☐ Other.

STUDENT NAME_____ DATE OF FORM_____

GRAND/ FATHER
Name_____ Current residence_____

If dead, date of death_____ _____

Place of birth_____ Date of birth_____

Schooling (number of years)
Primary_____ secondary_____ vocational_____ college_____

Occupation(s)_____Date_____ Migrated_____ Date_____

_____ " _____ " _____ " _____

_____ " _____ " _____ " _____

Religion_____

Place of marriage (to grand/ mother)_____

Date of marriage_____ If previously married: widower_____divorced_____

_____

GRAND/ MOTHER
Name_____ Current residence_____

If dead, date of death_____ _____

Place of birth_____ Date of birth_____

Schooling (number of years)
Primary_____ secondary_____ vocational_____ college_____

Occupation(s)_____Date_____ Migrated_____ Date_____

_____ " _____ " _____ " _____

_____ " _____ " _____ " _____

Religion_____

Place of marriage (to grand/ father)_____

Date of marriage_____ If previously married: widow_____divorced_____